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Death by 'Natural Causes'

CIA's Bizarre Ideas for Assassinations

Washington

At the height of the Cold War, the Central Intelligence Agency looked into ways to "knock off key guys" through such "natural causes" as cancer and heart attacks, it was disclosed yesterday.

Heavily censored CIA documents from a quarter-century ago show the agency even considered performing experiments on terminal cancer patients under the guise of "legitimate medical work."

The documents do not indicate, however, whether the talk about inducing cancer and heart attacks ever got past the memorandum stage.

The papers — released under Freedom of Information Act requests — were researched by Martin Lee of the Washington-based Assassination Information Bureau.

The CIA project apparently started with an undated, unsigned note indicating concern about the vulnerability of U.S. leaders to assassination by "natural causes."

The memo noted the "vulnerability of U.S. to unconventional attack" and referred to studies by the Office of Strategic Services, the World War II predecessor of the CIA.

"Knock off key people," the heavily censored document said. "How knock off key guys ... Natural Causes.

"Method produce cancer.

"Heart techniques ...

"Query — should facts on (blank) be dug up?

"Are they of interest to (blank). Probably yes.

"At any rate, we need know enough more about it to decide how much interest we have in it."

The next pertinent document was a Feb. 4, 1952, "draft" memorandum from "Chemical Branch, Research & Development."

The paper reported inspecting a lab for possible use in "medical research involving physiologically active chemical compounds."

"Human subjects would be available for work that could be carried out as legitimate medical research," it said. "Extensive animal facilities exist for other kinds of research."

The memo discussed the use of beryllium, a metallic element said to have "extreme toxicity" capable of inducing tumors.

"This is certainly the most toxic inorganic element and it produces a peculiar fibrotic tumor at the site of local application," the memo said.

It suggested "a study of the effect of inhaling small amounts of beryllium in the lungs, and other studies to evaluate the potentialities of beryllium as a covert weapon."

A document dated Aug. 4, 1954, showed the project was still receiving serious consideration at that time.

The unidentified writer provided a bibliography of such relevant works as "Chemical Induction of Cancer" and "Survey of Compounds Tested for Carcinogenic Properties."

"Methylcholanthrene is now recognized as probably the most potent known carcinogen (cancer-causing agent) in the production of tumors of various types," the memo said.

It suggested using "normal constituents of the human organism" to produce methylcholanthrene in the body "through a process of abnormal metabolism." A footnote gave the cost of the chemical as $4.40 a half gram, $8.25 a gram.

United Press